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Mob violence will not end without justice

Govt must ensure swift investigations and punishment

We are deeply disturbed by the persistence of mob violence in the country despite repeated assurances from the government that it would take firm action against those responsible. The deaths of at least 15 people in mob beatings this month alone show that those pledges have done little to stop such brutality. On Tuesday, two pickup truck drivers named Jony and Md Nishat were beaten to death in Dhaka's Jatrabari area on suspicion of being muggers. Just six days earlier, Alam Sheikh, who had come to Dhaka in search of work and reportedly had mental health issues, was beaten to death on the premises of Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital on suspicion of being a kidnapper. These violent crimes reflect a dangerous disregard for the rule of law.

On October 20, the home ministry released a report stating that 40 people were killed in 63 incidents of mob beating between January and September this year, compared with 63 deaths in 107 incidents during the same period last year. While government data indicate a decline, the figures recorded by rights organisations paint a different picture. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) documented 171 deaths in mob beatings during the first nine months of this year, while the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) recorded 187 deaths and 401 injuries in 398 incidents. This discrepancy between official and independent data raises questions about the government's assessment of the problem.

On September 1, Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed pledged to tackle mob violence firmly, arguing that the existing laws are sufficient to prosecute perpetrators. However, the government's apparent failure to ensure justice in these cases

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is emboldening perpetrators and perpetuating the culture of mob violence. In September 2024, Tofazzal Hossain was beaten to death at Dhaka University's Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall on suspicion of theft. Although a Dhaka court accepted a supplementary charge sheet in March this year and issued arrest warrants against 22 accused, only six have been arrested so far. Meanwhile, the investigation report on the killing of former Chhatra League leader Shamim Ahmed, also known as Shamim Molla, at Jahangirnagar University in September 2024 has yet to be submitted. Such delays and lack of progress only undermine public confidence in the justice system. Rights activists have also pointed out that a tendency to justify violence along social and political divides is fuelling such acts. When perpetrators believe they can evade punishment, and people see violence go unchallenged, it becomes harder to stop.

We urge the government to prove that its pledges are more than words. They must promptly investigate all reported mob killing cases, identify everyone involved, and ensure effective prosecution. The authorities should also compare official data with those of rights organisations to understand the full extent of the problem. Alongside law enforcement, the government must conduct nationwide awareness campaigns to make it clear that suspicion of a crime, alleged religious offence or personal grievance can never justify mob beating or killing. Restoring public confidence in the state's ability to protect its citizens and deliver justice is essential to end mob violence.

Safeguards key to curbing irregularities

Political will needed to check wilful loan defaults

We share the concerns of economists, bankers, and industry experts that existing laws and mechanisms to bring wilful defaulters to book and recover bad loans are too lax. Experts say wilful defaulters account for more than 80 percent of the bad loan portfolio which, as of June 2026, reached more than Tk 6 lakh crore—nearly a third of total disbursed loans. Moreover, most wilful defaulters are associated with a handful of powerful, politically connected conglomerates that took advantage of relaxed regulations under the Awami League regime.

Over the last two years, much of the looted funds could not be recovered because a large portion was siphoned out of the country, while loopholes in the conventional and lengthy loan recovery procedure also created barriers. The recovery machinery often catches minor defaulters while letting major ones slip through. Thus, there must be stricter measures taken against wilful borrowers. A comprehensive and transparent assessment of Bangladesh's bad loan portfolio to identify wilful defaulters must be carried out. Targeted action can then be taken against them, so that those who failed to repay loans due to the energy crisis, order cancellation, sluggish demand, and slow economic growth do not suffer the same consequences.

Similarly, when relaxing regulations in the financial sector to boost the economy, adequate safeguards must be in place to prevent disingenuous borrowers from taking advantage of the system. Besides, relaxing rules or lowering policy rates will not automatically encourage more private investment, which hit its lowest level in 11 years at the end of FY2024-25. Even private credit growth has remained below 5 percent for the last six months. According to bankers, demand for large letters of credit for machinery or factory expansion has been low, meaning domestic businesses are hesitant to make long-term investments.

While the energy crisis, persistent inflation, low real-wage growth, job cuts, and sluggish demand are discouraging private investment, political uncertainty and a deteriorating law-and-order situation are further dampening business confidence. This is where the government needs to act: reining in party-linked elements accused of extorting businesses, demonstrating the political will to bring wilful defaulters to book, and pursuing consistent policies that do not favour the powerful at the expense of the weak.

Only an independent caretaker system can ensure free, fair elections

Without credible elections, we will never attain political stability

THE THIRD VIEW



Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

It has not even been a year since we had the last national election, so why are we already talking about the next one? Because the amendment regarding the incorporation of the provisions for a caretaker government into our constitution is in the process of being formulated. This is a most important development as experience has repeatedly shown us that only a truly independent caretaker government system overseeing an election can guarantee a credible one.

Jamaat-e-Islami claims to be its original proponent. The Awami League, whose activities are banned at present, was the political mover and shaker behind this demand, and the BNP, under Khaleda Zia's government, was the party that incorporated it into the constitution in March 1996. All three parties can claim credit for it.

Although the 1991 election was held under an interim government headed by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, which came about through an agreement among all political parties, the elections since June 1996 were all held under the caretaker government system (until its eventual abolition in 2011 under the Awami League rule). While the defeated parties always criticised the elections as not being free and fair, they lived with the results, accepted the formation of a new government, and took part in parliamentary proceedings.

A brief review of history is relevant here. It was the Awami League that literally held the nation hostage to push through the caretaker government system. From 1994 onwards, Sheikh Hasina's party called for endless hartals to force the then BNP government to accept this system to hold elections. Inside parliament, it began with walkouts, which grew longer over time. This was followed by periodic boycotts, and finally, it ended with the resignation of the entire opposition, leaving the House totally one-sided and ineffective.

At the time, the BNP had underestimated public support for this change and conducted the election in February 1996 under the existing system, in which the ruling party remained in power during the election. The election was boycotted by all opposition parties led by the Awami League.

Although victorious, BNP appeared to have understood the public mood, amended the constitution to introduce the caretaker government system, and held another election in June 1996. Awami League won this one and came to power for the first time in 21 years. It had been ousted from power in 1975, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated.

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The fall of Gen HM Ershad in 1990 can be termed the restarting point of our democratic journey. With the caretaker government system in place as well as the restoration of the parliamentary system, we had a rare opportunity to strengthen our democratic institutions, especially the Election Commission, judiciary, and all other "accountability" bodies whose autonomy was a precondition for democracy to be genuinely functional.

But, tragically, our politicians did not utilise this vital opportunity. Instead of strengthening institutions of accountability and transparency, they politicised them, the bureaucracy and police being the most serious victims. The judiciary was not spared either. The fundamental principle that those in power must be kept accountable in a transparent manner was never accepted by our political parties.

So, as we moved on with elections—June 1996, 2001 and 2008—questions were often raised about their neutrality, though not generally on the basis of credible evidence. The crucial element in the caretaker government system was the agreement by all parties that the head of such a government—the chief adviser, with the rank and status of prime minister—would be the last retired chief justice. This worked when Justice Habibur Rahman headed the caretaker government in 1996, and the Awami League got elected. But in 2001, when the party was defeated, it raised a hue and cry over the tenure of Chief Adviser Justice Latifur Rahman.

During the BNP government's tenure from 2001 to 2006, its law minister, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, introduced a provision that extended the retirement age of Supreme Court judges. This altered the succession of the retired chief justice who would normally have taken charge as the chief adviser and brought the previously retired chief justice, Justice KM Hasan, into the picture. This triggered the Awami League's suspicions that the extension of the judges' retirement age was a ploy to have a chief adviser of BNP's own choosing. This led to tremendous political conflict, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency and the formation of an army-backed caretaker government regime led by former Bangladesh Bank Governor Fakhruddin Ahmed. The tenure was two years instead of 90 days. To the army's credit, it digitised our voter ID cards and helped introduce NID cards, which have since become essential to our lives.

In our view, of the many mistakes Sheikh Hasina committed, abolishing the caretaker government system was the most consequential. If she had continued with it, she would definitely have faced tougher elections—and may even have lost the next one—and thus would never have descended to such a despicable level of abuse of power, nepotism, cronyism, extrajudicial killings, and corruption later. Defeat in elections would have helped her political survival.

The 2008 election brought the Awami League back to power. By 2011, Sheikh Hasina abolished the caretaker government system through a constitutional amendment. The reason for the move was clear: she did not want to face any free and fair election in the future that might bring about her defeat. She wanted to remain in power for the foreseeable future.

It is worth recalling that, after the 2008 victory, Hasina did set up a special parliamentary committee headed by veteran politician and MP Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, with Suranjit Sengupta as the vice-chair. When this body submitted its recommendations to the leader of the House, there was no suggestion that the caretaker government system should be abolished. The idea was Hasina's, and the whole committee was forced to accept it, leading to the 15th Amendment to the constitution.

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So, what lessons can we draw from the caretaker government system since 1991? In all elections held under a ruling party government, the incumbent always won. In all elections held under caretaker governments, the opposition won. So, as it goes about restoring the system through a constitutional amendment, will the BNP be morally and politically strong enough to accept that prospect? Can its leaders, activists and MPs face this very unpleasant eventuality?

The reality is that BNP will not be able to ignore the huge public support underpinning the caretaker government idea. In the July National Charter, BNP accepted the system. But the million-dollar question is whether the caretaker government will be neutral enough, empowered enough, and structurally independent enough to hold a free and fair election that will enjoy public confidence.

Being in power has a near-suicidal blinding effect. The true public reaction to election results is not always immediately discernible. Even if it is, the party in power feels that, since public memory is "short", it will be able to make voters forget any election fraud through some development work. Sheikh Hasina really thought that the metro rail, the expressways, the Karnaphuli tunnel and other such infrastructure projects would erase people's displeasure at being deprived of their voting rights. The July uprising in 2024 proved that she was fundamentally wrong. Whatever the immediate demands were, the underlying issues behind her eventual fall included the fraudulent elections of 2014, 2018 and 2024.

We are now back at another starting point. The student-led mass uprising has given us another chance to institutionalise our democracy, the most important element of which is ensuring free and fair elections. We must face the unpleasant fact that, even after 55 years of independence, we cannot guarantee free and fair elections. This says a lot about the immaturity of our political culture.

The post-1991 caretaker government experiment was a very good start, but the fear of defeat among incumbents gradually grew to a level at which Sheikh Hasina abolished it. After more than 15 years of lost time, we are back on track. But we now have to solidify the process.

The July charter has laid out in great detail the steps towards setting up a durable caretaker government system. Item 16 in the charter, with 21 sub-items, addresses every aspect of the issue. It also allows parties that have expressed dissent to have their way if their party manifestos receive the voters' endorsement. This clears up many issues on which the BNP has expressed dissent.

However, in moving forward, the most important factor is the determination of the ruling party, which now enjoys a decisive majority in parliament, to set up a caretaker government system that will not be under its dominance. The most decisive aspect is the ruling party's willingness to accept the possibility that it may lose the next election. It is not inevitable, but it is possible. Accepting that possibility is the crucial political maturity that we must now demonstrate. It will help make our governments much more accountable and pro-people, instead of pro-party, so that their chances of winning people's hearts and minds remain high. This will have a tremendous positive impact on our entire governance process.



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